



Ahimsā

Newsletter of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

September 2013 (2557)

Bodhi and Arahattaphala: From Early Buddhism to Early Mahāyāna

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The event of Enlightenment which made the Ascetic Gotama into the Buddha is described several times in the Pāli Canon, particularly in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (for example, *suttas* nos. 4, 19, 26, 36). It is clear from these accounts that, while still a Bodhisatta (Sanskrit Bodhisattva), that is, “one seeking enlightenment”, He had already acquired proficiency in meditation practices and was able to enter both the fine-material and immaterial absorptions (*rūpa* and *arūpa jhānas*, respectively) at will, but recognized that none of these states of mind was, in itself, a solution to the riddle of existence, a permanent achievement that represented the final liberation from *saṃsāra*. The *jhānic* states were, indeed, satisfying in their own way and were highly valued in contemporary Yogic circles, but to rest content in them would mean stagnation and eventual regression into lower *saṃsāric* states again. The Ascetic Gotama was now aware that what was needed was the discovery of the cause of conditioned existence in *saṃsāra* in order to remove that cause and break the chain of conditionality.

Sitting under the tree which became hallowed in subsequent times as the Tree of Enlightenment (“*bodhi-tree*”), the Ascetic Gotama entered the fourth fine-material absorption and, with his mind firmly anchored in total equanimity (*upekkhā*), which is the main characteristic of this *jhāna*, He turned His attention to the past. He succeeded in breaking through the barrier of oblivion and recollected His previous lives, one by one, by the hundreds and by the hundreds of thousands, during the whole present world cycle, and, still

further into the past, during countless previous world cycles. In this way, He obtained knowledge of His former existences (*pubbenivāsānussati*), which became to Him a vivid personal illustration of the beginningless cyclic world of *saṃsāra*.

Next, He turned His attention to the world around Him, with its innumerable living beings. With his “clairvoyant eye” (*dibbacakkhu*), He could now see all the beings in *saṃsāra* with all their strengths and weaknesses, with all their achievements, failures, anxieties, and endeavors, and He saw how, at every moment, a large number of them died only to be reborn elsewhere in higher or lower states according to their actions. In this way, He obtained another knowledge, another vivid illustration of the vast world of *saṃsāra*, this time as it existed around Him, simultaneous with His own life.

With these two higher knowledges (*abhiññā*), He acquired a direct and concrete picture of the way the law of *kamma* (Sanskrit *karma*) worked, and He also saw the repetitiveness of *saṃsāric* existence. Looking back over His own beginningless past, He realized that He had traveled though

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Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- *Dhamma* study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original Teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the Teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the *Dhamma*, based primarily on Pāli sources.
2. To promote practice of the *Dhamma* in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the *Dhamma*, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pāli language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

Dhamma Study Groups

The current Sunday morning meeting schedule is as follows:

- 9:00 AM: Basic/Introductory study group focusing on *The Essential Teachings of Buddhism*.
- 10:00 AM: Meditation sitting.
- 11:00 AM: Intermediate study group focusing on *Just Seeing* by Cynthia Thatcher.

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all possible spheres of existence and had occupied all possible stations in life many times over. Looking around, He now saw those spheres of existence and stations within them in their seemingly infinite variety occupied by other beings. So, ultimately, the saṃsāric lives of His own past and the saṃsāric world around Him were the same.

If there had still been any doubt in Him as to the desirability of leaving saṃsāric existence behind, His knowledge of the totality of *saṃsāra* would have brought home to Him that there was no point in going on and on in the same way. There was nothing new in *saṃsāra* to which He could look forward and which would not be a repetition of what He had already been through countless times. The temporary detachment from and equanimity towards saṃsāric existence, as achieved in the state of the fourth fine-material absorption, could now only become permanent and effortless for Him, and He thus attained complete detachment from *saṃsāra* and any form of longing to remain in it as an involved participant. The remaining question was: Why? Why does this whole cycle of saṃsāric existence go on, and why is one involved in it?

In a way, the answer to this question was already there, known to the Ascetic Gotama as well as to most other ascetics of the time, because it formed the basis and motivation of their quest. Saṃsāric existence was unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and one was involved in and bound by it because of the “cankers” (*āsavas*), that is, because (1) of the canker of desire for gratification of the senses (sense desire) (*kāmāsava*), (2) of the canker of (desire for eternal) existence (*bhavāsava*), (3) of the canker of wrong views (*diṭṭhāsava*), and (4) of the canker of essential ignorance (*avijjāsava*). This motivating knowledge was, however, more like a working hypothesis which had not yet been verified empirically or experientially. But now, when the vision of the totality of *saṃsāra* as described above had been realized, the Ascetic Gotama recognized that a realistic basis had been laid for tackling the last problem, namely, the cause of it all. And, so in the third watch of the night of His Enlightenment, He knew exactly where to turn His attention next.

From the basis of the fourth fine-material absorption, the Ascetic Gotama now applied His mind to the realization of the destruction of the cankers (*āsavānaṃ khayaññāyā cittaṃ abhininnāmesim*). He clearly saw, as it actually was, the truths (1) of the unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) of saṃsāric existence, (2) of how it arose, (3) of its cessation, and (4) of what the way was leading to its cessation. He also saw the true nature of the cankers (*āsava*), how they arose, their cessation, and the way leading to their cessation. “Thus knowing and thus seeing, my mind was liberated from the canker of sense desire, from the canker of (desire for eternal) existence, (from the canker of wrong views), and from the canker of ignorance. There came the knowledge: ‘Liberation has been achieved’. I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no other more coming to any state of being’.” (*Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 4/32.)

It can easily be seen that the knowledge of the destruction of the cankers is in fact the knowledge of the four noble truths (*ariya-sacca*), which form the basis, the core, and the goal of the early Buddhist teaching and practice. Naturally, there are a number of discourses dealing with them in detail. Very briefly summarized: the first truth asserts the unsatisfactoriness of the whole of saṃsāric existence in its four main respects: (1) that of personality, composed of the five groups of aggregates (*pañc’upādānakkhandhā*) to which one clings as one’s own, although they do not belong to one; (2) that of the conscious life of a person represented by the six internal (*ajjhātika*) and six external (*bāhira*) bases (*āyatana*), that is, the five sense organs and the mind together with their respective sense objects; (3) that of the world as analyzed into its four basic forces or great elements (*mahābhūta*). The second truth obtains its elaboration in the form of the twelve links of the process of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). The third truth is also explained in the context of dependent origination, this time contemplated in reverse order. The fourth truth is the noble eightfold path, with all its intricate methods of progress and realization.

These then are, as far as can be gathered from the original sources, the contents of Enlightenment (*bodhi*) that transformed the Ascetic Gotama, the

Bodhisatta, the one “striving for enlightenment”, into the Buddha, the “fully-enlightened one”. They are often referred to, in a succinct formula, as the “three knowledges”: (1) the remembrance of former existences (*pubbenivāsānussati*); (2) the knowledge of the destinations of beings according to their actions (*yathākammūpagañāṇa*), or the “clairvoyant eye” (*dibbacakkhu*); and (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the cankers (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*). This list was later expanded to six “higher knowledges” (*abhiññā*), the three additional ones being: (1) supernormal powers (*iddhividhā*); (2) the “clairvoyant ear” (*dibbasota*); and (3) the ability to know the minds of others (*cetopariyañāṇa*).

None of these higher knowledges was unique to the Buddha, and, on various occasions, He gave the standard descriptions of the accomplished disciple as possessing either the three knowledges (*Dīgha Nikāya*, no. 13) or the six higher knowledges (*Dīgha Nikāya*, no. 34; *Majjhima Nikāya*, nos. 6, 7). This implies that there was no essential difference between the Enlightenment of the Buddha and the Enlightenment of His accomplished disciples. That applied even to the faculty of teaching the Dhamma to others. When Māra urged the Buddha after His Enlightenment to enter final *nibbāna* (*parinibbāna*), the Buddha refused, saying: “I will not pass into final *nibbāna*, O Evil One, until there are *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunīs*, *Upāsakas* and *Upāsikas* who have become *sāvakas* and *sāvikās* — accomplished, disciplined, skilled, learned, knowers of the Dhamma, trained in conformity with the Dhamma, entered upon the proper path, of perfect conduct, who, having acquired mastery of their own, will expound, show, make known, establish, reveal, analyze, and make clear the Dhamma, and who, with confidence, knowledge, and logic, will refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach this Dhamma of wondrous effect.” (*Dīgha Nikāya*, no. 16/3.7) It is clear from this passage that accomplished disciples (*sāvakas* and *sāvikās* = *ariya puggala* [Noble Ones]: Stream-Enterers, Once-Returners, Non-Returners, and Arahants) were foreseen by the Buddha shortly after His Enlightenment.

Thus, originally, there was no difference between the *bodhi* of the Buddha and the *bodhi* of

His accomplished disciples. This is important — they were all equally enlightened as to the causes of *samsāric* existence and, therefore, equally free from them, having reached *nibbāna*. They had the three knowledges or the six higher knowledges, and they had the capability to teach the Dhamma which, for all practical purposes, was equal to that of the Buddha Himself. The Pāli Canon contains a number of discourses on various aspects of the teaching and practice given by accomplished disciples which do not differ in style or contents from those ascribed to the Buddha. Moreover, each of these discourses was subsequently endorsed by the Buddha when reported to Him (cf., for example, Sāriputta’s discourse delivered to wanderers of other sects in *Samyutta Nikāya* 12:24). One difference remained clear, however: the Buddha was the first one to attain *bodhi* and He did it through His own effort; He was also the first and most skillful one to teach the Dhamma. On account of this, He was known as the “Perfect Teacher” and His Enlightenment as the “Incomparable Perfect Enlightenment” (*anuttara sammā sambodhi*).

But of course, once a difference is admitted in any aspect, it tends to be widened and extended to further aspects, and that is exactly what happened very early on. However, in one respect, the Pāli (Theravādin) tradition has remained consistent: no matter how superior the Buddha may have been to His Arahant disciples in teaching skills and no matter how incomparable His Enlightenment may have been to theirs, this had no bearing on the fact of being freed from *samsāra*, all having reached final *nibbāna*. Liberation was the prime aim, and that, essentially, was what made one an Arahant. Those seeking a quick shortcut to liberation soon discovered that it was the third knowledge, that of the destruction of the cankers (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*), which was the decisive factor for the attainment of *nibbāna*. The knowledge of one’s own past lives and of the comings and goings of other beings according to their deeds may have been important to a solitary truth seeker to demonstrate the futility of involvement in *samsāra* and to motivate him towards the final effort to destroy the cankers (*āsava*), but a disciple of a fully enlightened being may have found enough motivation to continue his struggle by accepting the teaching of his master in

full without personal verification of every single detail and, thus, have been able to complete his struggle and destroy the cankers on the basis of his grasp of the four noble truths alone.

In due course, as the number of accomplished disciples grew, fewer and fewer of them were known to have all three knowledges in full, let alone all of the six higher knowledges, and some of them apparently possessed only the one which was indispensable for liberation, namely, the third knowledge, that of the destruction of the cankers. Later Pāli tradition, therefore, classifies this third knowledge as “supramundane” (*lokutara*) and the remaining two as “mundane” (*lokiya*), since they could be acquired to a certain degree by anybody without bringing him closer to final liberation; they still belonged to and kept one within *samsāra*. They greatly enhanced, of course, the possibility of liberation, when properly used, but they also represented a danger, since they could be misused or prove a distraction or a diversion, if the requisite supramundane knowledge was not developed simultaneously or soon afterwards.

Thus, at an early stage in the Pāli canonical tradition, several types of liberated ones who had attained *nibbāna* were differentiated. Though they were not equal to each other in the attainment of higher spiritual powers, they were nonetheless recognized as Arahants who had destroyed their cankers. The foremost Arahant was the Buddha, who possessed all six higher knowledges and the supreme skill of an incomparable teacher. Next came the great Arahants who also possessed all or nearly all of these qualities, although perhaps in a slightly smaller measure, and whose teaching skill was not their own but was derived from their being disciples of the Buddha. Then followed Arahants who possessed the third knowledge and one or two of the other faculties. Last were Arahants who possessed only the third knowledge (the destruction of the cankers), which they had obtained through their understanding of the four noble truths and, particularly, of the chain of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). This amounted to acquiring wisdom, and, therefore, they were called “wisdom-liberated” (*paññā-vimutta*). They did not even have to become proficient in the attainment of the absorptions. Those who did attain the absorptions as well as

liberation through wisdom (*paññā*) were described as “both ways liberated” (*ubhatobhāgavimutta*). It does not, however, follow that they always used their jhānic proficiency for the attainment of further knowledges; they could have remained content with their supramundane knowledge of the destruction of the cankers. But the matter is far from being entirely clear. Later Pāli tradition elaborated the path to liberation which bypassed the absorptions entirely and developed only the supramundane knowledge of the destruction of the cankers into a method known as “dry” or “pure” insight (*sukkha* or *suddha vipassanā*).

From what has just been said, it is clear that the Pāli tradition has tended, from quite early times, to narrow down the contents of the fruit of Arahantship (*arahattaphala*) so that, although it represents full liberation, it does not quite merit the designation of “enlightenment” (*bodhi*), which must comprise all of the events of the night of the Buddha’s Enlightenment: (1) the remembrance of former existences; (2) the knowledge of the destinations of beings according to their actions; and (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the cankers. It was, therefore, hardly ever used to describe directly a disciple’s final achievement. (The Sanskrit Buddhist tradition, however, did use the term, and, in Mahāyāna texts, the Sanskrit term *śrāvakabodhi* is current, denoting the limited achievement of Hīnayānists, but it percolated into Pāli writing in the twelfth century CE with a somewhat upgraded meaning). The reason for this was probably the urgency of gaining liberation as quickly as possible without spending time and energy on developing the absorptions (*jhānas*) and mundane (*lokiya*) knowledges.

However, there is a pitfall in this development. Through forsaking the experience of the totality of *samsāra* as provided by a complete knowledge of one’s past lives as well as the comings and goings of beings, there arises the problem of the reliability or otherwise of a would-be Arahant’s knowledge of the destruction of his cankers. As previously mentioned, this knowledge is supramundane, and, therefore, whoever possesses it is in no doubt and cannot deceive himself. But this does not prevent those who do not possess it from deceiving themselves and thinking that they do have it. During the Buddha’s lifetime, with His power of

knowing the minds of others (*cetopariyañña*), His confirmation of the achievement of a newly-born Arahant gave it absolute authenticity, both for Him and other members of the Buddhist community, and other great Arahants could do the same even when the Buddha had passed away, although perhaps with less acceptable authority for some. But the time would inevitably come when no one could provide this service, and the danger of self-deception as to one's own achievement and deliberate deception on the part of false Monks going undetected, must have been recognized. The Buddha Himself seems to have anticipated the problem and gave a discourse in which He enumerated the criteria of Arahantship in the form of questions to be put by others (obviously unable to confirm the achievements by their own direct knowledge) to one who made the declaration of Arahantship (*Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 112). These criteria concern the unshakable freedom of the mind from the influence of the senses, from the constituents of personality, from the elements constituting the world, from the sixfold internal and external sense spheres, and from the preconceived notion of "I" and "mine".

Still, it could easily happen that a devout follower leading an austere life and practicing diligently could reach a state of inner balance and detachment resembling to him the final attainment as defined by the third knowledge, while, in fact, the cankers would still exist in him in a latent form. Examples of this happening can be found in the Buddha's contemporaries, such as, for example, the story of the *theras* Mahā Nāga and Mahā Tissa, who believed for sixty years that they were Arahants, until Dhammadinna, one of their students, reached Arahantship together with four higher knowledges, and, seeing that his teachers were only learned worldlings (*puthujjana*), helped them recognize and complete the path.

From this, we can see that there was enough ground for starting to look down on *arahattaphala* in comparison with *bodhi*, unless one carefully differentiated the types of Arahantship and remained entirely clear about the point that it was the third knowledge about the destruction of the cankers (*āsavakkhayañña*) which made for final liberation and that, in this respect, there was no difference between the Buddha and any type of

Arahant. The Theravāda scrupulously guarded this position, but elsewhere, the situation was different. Perhaps it was the confusion brought about by erroneous claims of Arahantship, such as those referred to above (but with less fortunate outcomes) that gave rise to the view that Arahants were liable to fall away from *nibbāna*, as held by Saṃmitīyas, Vajjiputtakas, Sarvāstivādins, and some Mahāsaṅghikas.

The nature of the attainment of Arahantship was further made questionable by the very issue that brought about the schism of the Saṅgha to which the Mahāsaṅghikas owed their origin and which concerned the status of the Arahant. The impression one gets from the scanty accounts of the event in the fragmentary sources is that at the bottom of it all was a desire to make the claim of Arahantship more easily available. One can only wonder why this should be desired, inasmuch as Arahantship meant the destruction of cankers and consequent freedom from saṃsāric existence after death and total equanimity towards it while still alive, so that the question of status inside and outside the Saṅgha was totally irrelevant to it. However, allowance must be made for the frailty of human nature, even on the part of ordained Monks if they are not liberated. The term "Arahant" originally meant "worthy (one)", which implies that, like the whole *sāvaka-saṅgha*, he is "worthy of offerings, worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of salutation, an incomparable field of merit to the world", as the standard description goes. Although the word "Arahant" is not used in this description, the implication is clear, and the *Vimānavatthu Aṭṭhakathā* spells it out when it defines the Arahant, among other things, as deserving requisites, such as food, etc. (*paccayānaṃ arahattā*).

Thus, it is easy to imagine that, in the climate of the decline of standards in the Saṅgha towards the end of Maurya rule in India (321—185 BCE), when richly endowed and well supported monasteries became desirable places to live, a substantial portion of their residents had rather more mundane reasons for becoming Monks than finding the quickest way to final liberation, while the acquisition of the status of an Arahant, in the eyes of others, particularly lay patrons, would be highly desirable to them.

The tendency to revise the criteria for the attainment of Arahantship undoubtedly existed among genuine Monks who did not belong within the fold of Theravāda — for good reason. The image of the Buddha had, by this time, undergone a considerable change among the other Buddhist sects. The Buddha was no longer seen by most as a mere human being who had found the way to and attained Enlightenment and taught that way to others to enable them to reach the same state, but more of an embodiment of the cosmic principle of Enlightenment; and with this view was changed also the idea of the contents of Enlightenment. The first two knowledges, in their original form, were not longer impressive enough. The cosmic principle of Enlightenment, as manifested in the person of the Buddha, caused Him to become omniscient in every conceivable respect. Claims of omniscience had been made in the time of the Buddha for other ascetic teachers, such as, for example, Mahāvīra (*Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 79), and it is understandable that such a claim would eventually be made for the Buddha as well, but it is clearly absent in the early discourses, and the claims of omniscience in leaders of non-Buddhist sects was, moreover, rejected in those discourses.

Yet, when the claim of omniscience was made for the Buddha in the process of later development of Buddhist sectarian views, it was transferred also onto the Arahant; this shows that the original tradition — according to which the achievement of the Arahant was practically identical with that of the Buddha, not only in the certainty of liberation, but also in the other knowledges — was still very much alive. It also shows that the Theravādin doctrine allowing for final liberation of an Arahant through the third knowledge only (*paññāvimutti* of a *sukkhavipassaka*) was not universally shared and may have been a very early, purely sectarian Theravādin development. It probably saved the Theravādins from the dilemma faced at this later stage by the other sects, for the requirement of omniscience for the attainment of Arahantship appeared to many, quite naturally, as unacceptable.

At the time of the schism between the more orthodox Theravādins and the revisionist Mahāsaṅghikas, both of these ideas were incorporated — along with a third one — into five points by the Monk Bhadra (also known as Mahādeva), who

sought to redefine the concept of Arahantship as totally distinct from the attainment of Buddhahood or Enlightenment. He claimed that an Arahant (1) could still be seduced by deities in dreams and have seminal discharge while asleep, (2) might be ignorant of some matters, (3) might have doubts, (4) might be instructed by other persons, and (5) could enter the path as a result of the spoken word.

Points 2, 3, and 4 apparently arose as a result of confusion about omniscience. Clearly, even genuine Arahants lacked knowledge of all matters and facts about saṃsāric reality, such as, for example, expert knowledge of sciences and crafts, had doubts and were uncertain about the outcome of ordinary events (for example, whether they would obtain almsfood in a certain village), and needed instruction or information from others (for example, how to find their way to an unfamiliar locality). The Theravādins who dealt with all five points in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (*Kathāvathu* II, 1—6) would concede points 2, 3, and 4, in this form, not only for Arahants, but also for the Buddha. But, they would carefully make clear that these points did not apply to the knowledge of the Dhamma, which both the Buddha and the Arahants possessed in full. They had no doubt about it and could not be instructed in it by anybody with lesser achievement. Bhadra's deviation from the early canonical view was twofold: (1) he would ascribe, wrongly, but in line with the tendency of the time, omniscience to the Buddha in all matters, both mundane and supramundane, while denying it, rightly, to Arahants, but (2) he would further allow, wrongly, for some measure of ignorance and doubt in Arahants even in questions concerning the Dhamma, namely, in their supramundane (third) knowledge of being liberated, and for the possibility of Arahants being instructed in these matters even by non-Arahants.

As indicated above, these points (2, 3, and 4), although arising from conceptual confusion about supramundane and mundane forms of knowledge, could be regarded as stemming from genuine problems experienced by earnest Monks, and they might have been solved in an enlightened dialog between Bhadra's faction and the *theras*. The first point, however, was one which undoubtedly aroused suspicion as to its motivation and betrayed eagerness to acquire an external status rather than

an internal realization. At best, it showed deep ignorance about the third knowledge, namely, the destruction of the cankers. By definition, this transcended the normal knowledge of the surface consciousness and penetrated the entire mind with all its layers, freeing it from cankers completely. Bhadra's first point would allow Monks who had acquired equanimity in their daily life by the routine practice of renunciation to consider themselves and be acknowledged by others as Arahants, even if their cankers were only partially suppressed by being driven into the unconscious, from whence they could still influence dreams. Such an achievement, however, if not further perfected, has to be regarded as relative and not final and could be lost in the face of powerful pressure from the outside. Undoubtedly, this must have happened to Monks who regarded themselves and who were regarded by others as Arahants, and that would have been one of the factors leading to the development of the view that Arahants could fall away.

The Theravādins were very clear about this, however, and, remaining adamant about the true nature of Arahantship as the final and supra-mundane achievement of liberation, that is, *nibbāna*, they refuted Bhadra's first point outright. It seems, however, that they were in the minority, and, from then on, their influence in India waned, though they have continued to flourish in Śrī Lanka and Southeast Asia until the present day. In India, the Mahāsaṅghika concept of the omniscient Buddha as the embodiment of the cosmic principle of Buddhahood became the basis for further elaboration of Mahāyāna Buddhology, which later led to the birth of the great schools of Buddhist philosophy (Mādhyamika, Yogacāra, etc.).

However, the outcome of the redefinition of Arahantship cannot be looked upon as successful. The relaxed criteria enabled many Monks of lesser attainment, as well as status-seeking Monks whose general conduct and knowledge of the Dhamma were manifestly insufficient to meet the strict criteria adhered to by the Theravādins (*Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 112), to proclaim themselves as Arahants. No doubt, many Monks took advantage of this opportunity, so that a profusion of self-styled Arahants occurred in India at the time. It is not known to what extent this status helped them

to acquire the desired benefits, at least in the short term, but the long-term downgrading of the criteria was counterproductive. In the creative climate of religious fervor and the quest for perfection which became conspicuous in Indian Buddhism a century or two after the Mahāsaṅghika schism and led to the appearance of new *sūtras* which reformulated the soteriological message of the Dhamma, the achievement of Arahantship ranked low, was not seen to be final, and was even compared to a child's toy (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* III, 70—90). In its devalued form, Arahantship simply could not satisfy the spiritual aspiration of those who sought the realization of the ultimate goal.

Thus, it was necessary to look again to the achievement of the Buddha Himself, and, in the absence of the original concept of the Arahant as one who is equal in knowledge and teaching skill to the Buddha, it was Buddhahood itself, with its perfect Enlightenment and capability to save innumerable beings through teaching, that became the goal. So, instead of following the Eightfold Path, the aspirant now embarked on the path of Bodhisattvahood in order to develop perfections (*pāramittā*) and to become the Buddha of a future age. This, of course, was not an innovation, for that was what the Buddha had to go through and so had His predecessors and so will those who will come in the future, like Maitreya (Pāli Metteyya). What was new was the recommendation that this path be followed by everybody, a requirement that was both unrealistic and contrary to the original teaching. After all, there is no need for so many Buddhas, even if worlds are innumerable. Yet, the goal to be achieved could not be devalued again, and there was no way, given the Mahāsaṅghika and (later) Mahāyāna doctrinal developments, that Arahantship could be rehabilitated within these schools — an Arahant was simply no longer seen as truly enlightened, as was a Buddha. The desire to achieve Enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) for the sake of all sentient beings became the motivation, and so, the designation “Bodhisattva”, a being intent on Enlightenment, became the only acceptable one, even though the original aim of the path of a Bodhisattva, namely, to become the Buddha of a certain world period as its perfect Teacher, was abandoned. Thus was developed the concept of Bodhisattvas as a class of enlightened beings in

their own right who need never become Buddhas yet are very close to them, both in the quality of their Enlightenment and in their capacity to teach and generally help other suffering beings. Inasmuch as these Bodhisattvas are usually in the retinue of a Buddha, they have a position which is practically equivalent to that of the great Arahants of the historical Buddha.

Further developments followed, but, at this particular point, the evolution of Buddhist ideas came full circle. The debasement of the original ideal of spiritual accomplishment of Arahantship was reformulated in the northern schools as the spiritual ideal of Bodhisattvahood. The fact that the Theravādins in the south have preserved the ideal of Arahantship virtually unaltered when it was devalued in the northern schools gave them the right to refuse to fit neatly under the heading “Hīnayāna” and to dismiss outright the Mahāyāna criticism of the goal of Arahantship as they have reinterpreted it. The criticism of the Mahāyāna scriptures was justifiable when applied to the debased image of Arahantship that developed as a result of Bhaddra’s revisions but does not in the least apply to the great enlightened Arahants of early Buddhism, with their proficiency in attaining the absorptions (*jhānas*), the three knowledges (*ñāṇas*) or six higher knowledges (*abhiññās*), and many other qualities as contained in the standard descriptions in the Pāli scriptures, including the capacity of delivering enlightened discourses and leading congregations of disciples.

Thus, the conclusion must be that the ancient controversy between the so-called “Hīnayāna” and Mahāyāna, justifiable at a time in India when the ideal of early Buddhism was obscured in certain schools, is meaningless if applied today to early Buddhist tradition as preserved in the Pāli Canon of the Theravādins and to the surviving schools of Mahāyāna (Chinese Buddhism and its offshoots and Tibetan Buddhism). It further appears clear that the whole Buddhist tradition is vested in the concept of *bodhi* as defined by the Buddha’s own attainments on the night of His Enlightenment and matched by the attainments of the great Arahants. This means that the contents of *arahattaphala* must be equal to or very closely comparable to the Enlightenment (*sammāsambodhi*) of the Buddha. Inasmuch as the Theravādin School has preserved the original understanding of the nature of

arahattaphala, it is not a “lesser vehicle”, since it offers the ultimate Buddhist realization, namely, *nibbāna*, to all beings. ■

The original version of this essay was published in *The Bodhisattva Ideal: Essays on the Emergence of the Mahāyāna* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society [2013]), pp. 51—67. The version published in this issue of the CBF newsletter has been edited and revised to improve clarity.

Becoming a Buddhist

BY VENERABLE S. DHAMMIKA

QUESTION: How does someone become a Buddhist?

ANSWER: Once there was a wealthy man named Upāli. He was the follower of another religion (Jainism), and he went to the Buddha in order to engage him in a debate and convert him. But after talking to the Buddha, he was so impressed that he decided to become a follower of the Buddha. But the Buddha said:

“Make a proper investigation first. Proper investigation is good for a well-known person like yourself.

“Now I am even more pleased and satisfied when the Lord says to me: ‘Make a proper investigation first.’ For, if members of another religion had secured me as a disciple, they would have paraded a banner all around the town saying: ‘Upāli has joined our religion.’ But the Lord says to me: ‘Make a proper investigation first. Proper investigation is good for a well known person like yourself.’”

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In Buddhism, understanding is the most important feature, and understanding takes time. So do not impulsively rush into Buddhism. Take your time, ask questions, consider carefully, and *then* make your decision. The Buddha was not interested in increasing the number of His followers merely for the sake of having more adherents than other religions. Instead, He was concerned that people should understand His teachings and put them into

practice in their daily lives, but only after a careful investigation and consideration of facts.

QUESTION: If I have done this and I find the Buddha's teaching acceptable, what would I do then if I want to become a Buddhist?

ANSWER: It would be best to join a good temple or Buddhist group, support them, be supported by them, and continue to learn more about the Buddha's teachings. Then, when you are ready, you would formally become a Buddhist by taking the Three Refuges.

QUESTION: What are the Three Refuges?

ANSWER: A refuge is a place where people go when they need safety and security. There are many types of refuge. When people are unhappy, they take refuge with their friends, when they are worried and frightened, they might take refuge in false hopes and beliefs. As they approach death, they might take refuge in the belief in an eternal heaven. But, as the Buddha says, none of these are true refuges, because they do not give comfort and security based on reality.

"Truly these are not safe refuges, not the refuge supreme. Not the refuge whereby one is freed from all sorrow. But to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha and to see with real understanding the Four Noble Truths — Suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of suffering, this, indeed, is a safe refuge — it is the refuge supreme. It is the refuge whereby one is freed from all suffering."

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Taking Refuge in the Buddha is a confident acceptance of the fact that one can become fully enlightened and perfected just as the Buddha was. Taking Refuge in the Dhamma means understanding the Four Noble Truths and basing one's life on the Noble Eightfold Path. Taking Refuge in the Saṅgha means looking for support, inspiration and guidance from all who walk the Noble Eightfold Path. Doing this, one becomes a

Buddhist and thus takes the first step on the path towards *nibbāna*.

QUESTION: What changes have taken place in your own life since you first took the three refuges?

ANSWER: Like countless millions of others over the last 2,600 years, I have found that the Buddha's teachings have made sense out of a difficult world, they have given meaning to what was a meaningless life, they have given me a humane and compassionate ethics with which to lead my life, and they have shown me how I can attain a state of purity and perfection in the next life. A poet in ancient India once wrote of the Buddha:

To go to Him for refuge, to sing His praise, to do Him honor and to abide in His Dhamma is to act with understanding.

I agree with these words completely.

QUESTION: I have a friend who is always trying to convert me to his religion. I am not really interested in his religion, and I have told him so, but he will not leave me alone. What can I do?

ANSWER: The first thing you must understand is that this person is not really your friend. A true friend accepts you as you are and respects your wishes. I suspect that this person is merely pretending to be your friend so that he can convert you. When people try to impose their will on you, they are certainly not friends.

QUESTION: But he says he wants to share his religion with me.

ANSWER: Sharing your religion with others is a good thing. But I suggest that your friend does not know the difference between sharing and imposing. If I have an apple, I offer you half and you accept my offer, then I have shared with you. But if you say to me "Thank you, but I have already eaten" and I keep insisting that you take half the apple until you finally give in to me, this can hardly be called sharing. Rather, it is coercion,

intimidation, pressure, or bullying. People like your so-called “friend” try to disguise their bad behavior by calling it “sharing”, “generosity”, or “love”, but by whatever name they call it, their behavior is still just rude, bad manners, and selfish.

QUESTION: So how can I stop him?

ANSWER: It is simple. First, be clear in your mind what you want. Secondly, clearly and briefly tell him so. Thirdly, when he asks you questions like “What is your belief on this matter” or “Why don’t you want to come to the meeting with me”, clearly, politely, and persistently repeat your first statement. “Thank you for the invitation but I would rather not come”. “Why not?” “That is really my business. I would rather not come.” “But there will be many interesting people there.” “I am sure there will be, but I would rather not come.” “I am inviting you because I care about you.” “I am glad you care about me, but I would rather not come.” If you clearly, patiently, and persistently repeat yourself and refuse to allow him to get you involved in a discussion, he will eventually give up. It is a shame that you have to

do this, but it is very important for people to learn that they cannot impose their beliefs or wishes upon others.

QUESTION: Should Buddhists try to share the Dhamma with others?

ANSWER: Yes, they should. And I think most Buddhists understand the difference between sharing and imposing. If people ask you about Buddhism, tell them. You can even tell them about the Buddha’s teachings without their asking. But if, either by their words or their actions, they let you know that they are not interested, accept that and respect their wishes. It is also important to remember that you let people know about the Dhamma far more effectively through your actions than through preaching to them. Show people the Dhamma by always being considerate, kind, tolerant, upright, and honest. Let the Dhamma shine forth through your speech and actions. If each of us, you and I, know the Dhamma thoroughly, put it into practice fully, and share it generously with others, we can be of great benefit to ourselves and others as well. ■



Ajahn Chah Memorial